

Refuge Place Names: How places were named on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Gary Titus

Imagine if places had no names. How would your friends tell you how to find that “secret” moose hunting lake or fishing hole? Yet, early maps of Alaska showed vast areas of land and water with no names. A 1915 U.S. Geological Survey map of the Kenai Peninsula has the entire eastern half of the Kenai marked as “unexplored.”

The Dena’ina people of Alaska already had place names for many lakes and streams. These names were passed down through story telling and experiences. The names sounded strange to early explorers and settlers, who had trouble pronouncing them or spelling them. Some names were changed into forms resembling English words or were just replaced. Some a few examples are: Shantatlik Creek which replaced Shanteh K’eleht, meaning summer fish run place, and Botteninthin Lake replaced Batinitin Bena, (Trail-goes-by-it Lake) and Tustumena Lake replaced Dusdubena Lake.

In 1964 refuge managers recognized the problems of not having place names. Approximately 250 lakes were labeled by name on geological maps and sent to the U. S. Geological Survey for updating. Today, approximately 1,000 lakes of significant size are still unnamed. The names that were selected were primarily historical or represented names of birds, animals and trees. A few names were of local Indian or Eskimo origin and while others took on the names of later homesteaders and residents like Frisbee and Swanson.

The lakes Petersen, Watson, Chatelain and Rhode were named after former Fish and Wildlife employees who died in the line of duty.

On September 9, 1955, James D. Petersen and Gerald H. Watson, wildlife refuge employees were lost in Skylark Lake in the line of duty. It was moose hunting season and they were out to enforce the rules. Watson was a federal trainee visiting the territory in the summer of 1955. Petersen, his boss, was born in a cabin at the mouth of the Kasilof River, the son of a prominent Kenai family whose history in the territory went back to the days of sailing ships. As Assistant Refuge Manager for seven years, Petersen had been among the first

employees hired by the Kenai National Moose Range.

Rhode Lake was named after former Alaska Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife Director and pilot Clarence Rhode who went missing in his beloved Grumman Goose in the Brooks Range.

In those days naming or re-naming a lake after a person or otherwise was relatively simple with little more than a letter to the United States Geological Survey. More recently, naming an unnamed lake has become a very difficult and seldom accomplished process. For example there was an unsuccessful attempt by The Alaska Department of Fish and Game and others to name a lake in the area encompassed by the Moose Research Center within the Refuge after a former employee who was lost in a polar bear survey north of Barrow. Despite a concerted formal effort the naming request was denied.

Today on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge there are lake names that follow certain themes like Swan, Cygnet, Waterfowl, and Nest or lakes that are named because of certain geographic features or landforms. For example Rock Lake has a huge glacially deposited rock protruding as an island and Twin Lakes feature two nearly identical lakes. Gooseneck Lake as you might imagine resembles a goose with an outstretched neck and Elephant took on the vague shape of an Elephant. One can almost imagine the guess-that-shape exercise that managers went through prior to submitting their place names list to the United States Geological Survey.

Other lakes and places were named after activities, proximity or individuals known to use the lakes. We have a chain of Canoe lakes within the Refuge’s canoe trails, a Trapper Joe Lake named after a trapper nick-named “Joe,” and a Lonely and a Lonesome, that sit apart geographically from other lakes. One might wonder how some lakes were named, while others are obvious. There are also lakes named for fishing: an Angler, Sport Fish, Hook, Lure, Spinner, Snag, Fish, Dolly Varden, Trout, Chum and Rainbow Lake. Just about any kind of animal is a favorite name for a mountain, river, or whatever, from Woodpeck-

ers to Donkeys and Muskrats to Bears. Taking creeks alone, the Refuge has Moose, Bear, Beaver, and Sheep creeks on the Refuge. Now this would be fine if you're describing a hot fishing spot to a local resident but in the state of Alaska there are 47 Moose creeks, 57 Bear creeks and 28 Sheep creeks. We do have the only Afonasi Creek, Akula Lake, and Jigsaw Lake, however.

Sometimes place names were controversial. The controversy might relate to the correct spelling or use of an apostrophe in a name like in Jim's Landing, a boat landing on the Upper Kenai River. Jims' Landing was not named after one Jim, but two, Jim Dunmire and Jim O'Brien, so it should be Jims' Landing. Before the Jims, it was known as Melchoir Landing, after a Surprise Creek miner who used this popular spot as a boat launch.

In the case of Upper and Lower Alcatraz, these were changed in 1965 to Upper and Lower Ohmer lakes in honor of Earl N. Ohmer, who served as chairman of the Territorial Alaska Game Commission. I prefer the original names myself, the new cabin on Upper Ohmer could be named, "Alcatraz."

During the winter while building the original Sterling highway a road crew was working in the Rock Lake area on Skilak Loop Road. The weather got colder and as the temperature dropped to 30 and then 40 below, the mix of the isolation, cold and fear of never getting out gave them the feeling of being in Alcatraz. Alcatraz was America's premier maximum-security prison from 1934 to 1963. The crew did get out and the name stuck. What happened to the crew? They quit as soon as they reached "civilization."

Local names not otherwise known to officials have always played an important role in describing and

identifying locations to others. When Refuge managers named lakes in the 1950s and 1960s, historically used local names were not always known to managers attempting to formally name streams, lakes, mountains and rivers. Errors or mis-understandings were not uncommon. This process forever confused certain old timers trying to reconcile new names with the ones they had always used. For example, Bear Creek on Tustumena Lake somehow got re-named from Birch Creek and the locally known real Bear Creek further up the Tustumena shore was somehow re-named Moose Creek. Tustumena folk continued to have a Bear Creek, just not in the right place.

As I grow older, it becomes harder to accept change in general and place names specifically. The hardest name change for me is remembering not to call the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge the "Moose Range." The Kenai National Moose Range was established by executive order to protect "the natural breeding and feeding range of the giant Kenai moose" in 1941. The name was changed to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge in 1980, yet I still prefer calling the Refuge the Moose Range! Traditional names die hard for many others as well. It is not uncommon to still get a puzzled look from a long-time Kenai Peninsula resident when you tell them you work for Kenai National Wildlife Refuge... but when you quickly recover with a... you know... the "Moose Range," all is well and understood.

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